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**“Women Must Endure
According to Their Karma”
Cambodian Immigrant Women Talk
About Domestic Violence**

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Asian populations living in the United States share similar cultural values that influence their experiences with domestic violence. However, it is critical to recognize how differential cultural beliefs in the context of immigration and adjustment to life in the United States affect attitudes, interpretations, and response to domestic violence. This article discusses findings from community-based participatory action research that explores how Cambodian immigrant women talk about domestic violence, what forms of abuse contribute to domestic violence, and what strategies they use to cope with and respond to abuse in their lives. The richness of this research lies in the stories that immigrant women tell about their struggle and their strength in addressing domestic violence.

Keywords: *domestic violence; Cambodian immigrant women; intimate partner violence; participatory action research*

Our Khmer women must endure according to their karma.

If we endure according to our karma we will certainly die.

—Cambodian Survivors of Domestic Violence

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Domestic violence has been documented as a social problem across diverse ethnic and cultural groups with an increasing awareness that women's responses to abuse vary, in part, because of specific social and cultural context in which their abuse takes place. Studies on Asian immigrants and refugees have shown that sociocultural factors—language, gender roles, and values related to help-seeking behavior—influence how women who are abused by their partners will interpret and respond to domestic violence (Dasgupta, 1998; Yoshihama, 2001; Yoshioka, DiNoia, & Ullah, 2001). Structural factors including financial resources, social support, availability of culturally competent help, and immigrant status also influence women's responses to domestic violence (Bhattacharjee, 1997; Crenshaw, 1995).

Asian populations living in the United States share similar cultural values, relative to mainstream America, that influence their experiences with domestic violence. However, it is critical to recognize how differential cultural beliefs that may affect attitudes and response to domestic violence also reflect differing sociopolitical contexts of immigration and patterns of adjustment to life in the United States. This project builds on previous research by focusing on specific refugee and immigrant groups that have been underrepresented in research and service delivery. In this article, we discuss findings from research with Cambodian women living in Seattle, Washington, as part of a larger community-based participatory action project that explored the cultural context of domestic violence for immigrants and refugees. The richness of this research lies in the stories that Cambodian women tell about their struggles and their strength in addressing domestic violence.

Situating Cambodians in the United States: War, Trauma, and Migration

The U.S. 2000 Census documented 171,937 Cambodians residing in the United States and more than 5,200 in the Seattle, Washington, area. Although not all Cambodians immigrated to the United States as refugees, the backdrop of historic trauma of war and migration are inseparable from the struggle faced by Cambodian victims and survivors of domestic violence living in the United States. From 1975 to 1979, a time known as the killing fields gripped Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge government instigated brutal atrocities against its own people. An estimated 1 to 1.5 million people died by execution, starvation, or illness (Kiernan, 1996) while up to 750,000

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Cambodians fled to refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border (Shawcross, 1984).

Research on Cambodian refugees illustrates the devastating psychological impact of cumulative traumas from genocide, separation from family and friends, torture, reeducation (brainwashing) camps, escape to and life in refugee border camps, and adjustment to U.S. society (Chung, 2001; Mollica, Wyshak, & Lavelle, 1987; Uehara, Farris, Morelli, & Ishisaka, 2001). Within the past decade, research on Cambodian refugees and immigrants has focused on patterns of stress, coping, and healing (Catalico, 1997; Frye & D'Avanzo, 1994; Uehara et al., 2001) family planning (Kulig, 1994), and educational achievement (Smith-Hefner, 1993). However, despite studies on the impact of traumatic experiences from war, flight, and resettlement, few studies have examined these issues related to domestic violence among Cambodian immigrants.

Understanding Domestic Violence in Asian Immigrant Communities

Critical examination of violence against women theory reveals a proneness to universalize women's experiences and reproduce race and class hegemony. This has fueled researchers and practitioners to address the experiences of women of color, including immigrants and refugees (hooks, 1997; Kanuha, 1996; Walker, 1990). Although domestic violence research on Asian immigrants remains limited in general, recent studies on specific Asian groups have offered insight into cross-cultural differences among and within Asian populations.

Yoshihama et al. (2001) suggested using an immigrants-in-context framework that "explicitly acknowledges that immigrants' experiences of domestic violence take place in and are shaped by an ongoing interplay between their current sociocultural context and that of the country of origin" (p. 315). Incorporating analysis of the sociocultural context can influence measurement of incidence and prevalence. For example, in a community-based sample of Japanese immigrants in the United States, Yoshihama and colleagues found that additional survey items that were rooted to Japanese sociocultural context—"throwing liquid, overturning a dining table, and forced sexual intercourse when concerned about other people around" (p. 313)—resulted in a 4.8% increase in reported physical assault and a 10.5% increase in reported sexual assault (see Yoshihama et al., 2001 for more details).

Interethnic attitudinal differences provide another arena for understanding how culture intersects with domestic violence. Yoshioka et al. (2001)

found that although general themes among Asian cultures exist (such as emphasis on harmonious interpersonal relations and deterrence of outside intervention), significant differences in attitudes supporting wife abuse were demarcated by ethnicity. Compared to three other Asian ethnic groups (Lao, Chinese, and Vietnamese), Cambodian respondents strongly endorsed male privilege, were more likely to justify violence in certain situations, and were less likely to endorse decisions to leave or divorce a batterer (Yoshioka et al., 2001). Common attitudes about Cambodian women's roles include obeying and respecting one's husband, maintaining harmony in social relations, and supporting husbands' sexual entitlement over their wives (Kulig, 1994). Although their study did not specifically address domestic violence, Frye and D'Avanzo (1994) identified various coping strategies employed by Cambodian immigrants including discouraging sad thoughts, talking softly to someone who is violent, and doing nothing.

Specific studies are needed to better explain how attitudes around marital relations have changed after settling in the United States. Ong's (2003) extensive research with Cambodian refugees in the United States noted that at least before the Pol Pot regime "while the ideal woman was submissive and obedient, rural Cambodian women shared with their counterparts elsewhere in Southeast Asia a reputation for running their households, engaging in trade, and pushing their husbands around" (p. 32). Nevertheless Ong also wrote that, in their memories of Cambodia, refugees recall Cambodian society as placing a higher value on men than on women. Similar to other immigrants, it is possible that nostalgia for traditional cultural practices provide the basis for abusers to assert power and control over their wives (Abraham, 1998).

Each of these studies demonstrate the importance in addressing how sociocultural differences within groups and between groups influence the way victims and/or survivors of domestic violence interpret their situations and what strategies they prefer to use in responding to abuse. However, socioculturally rooted beliefs and practices reflect only one aspect of women's responses to domestic violence. Structural factors including English language ability, economic status, and the ability to provide for children are also significant (Bui, 2003; Friedman, 1992). Immigrants also face vulnerabilities because of their immigration status, work prohibitions, and threat of deportation (Narayan, 1995). To develop culturally competent domestic violence services for immigrant women, we must better understand how women with different sociocultural contexts interpret and respond to abuse as they adjust to life in the United States.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

The current study with Cambodian immigrants was part of a larger effort to gain a better understanding of the experience of domestic violence among women from eight ethnic minority communities and among lesbian/bisexual/trans people (see introductory article to this special issue for details about the overall project). The entire project applied a participatory action research (PAR) design where researchers and community participants worked together to develop and conduct the research, participate in the research activities, summarize and analyze results, and collectively formulate recommendations.

Through partnering with service providers the principal research questions and topic areas were shared across groups and focused on the following:

- the experience of domestic violence among Cambodian immigrants living in Seattle, Washington
- awareness of, access to, and satisfaction with existing domestic violence services among these women
- survivor-generated solutions for addressing domestic violence in their community
- cultural appropriateness of services and problems with service delivery.

Through partnering with service providers and domestic violence advocates and survivors, the current study aimed to formulate a culturally relevant response to domestic violence that would benefit Cambodian women experiencing domestic violence and the Seattle-based agencies serving women from this population.

METHOD

Because little is known about the factors that influence Cambodian women's interpretations of and responses to domestic violence, in addition to their access to domestic violence services, a qualitative approach that sought to explore these issues was employed.

Research Team Organization

The Qualitative Research Team (QRT) was composed of Health Department and University researchers and bicultural, bilingual representatives from Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA), a nonprofit, multiethnic organization founded in 1985 to support and empower refugee and immigrant women

adjusting to life in the United States. ReWA's staff speak 18 languages and provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services to more than 900 women and children each year. ReWA offers a variety of services including but not limited to specific services of domestic violence survivors. ReWA also provides services such as English as a second language, family literacy, citizenship preparation, parent education, advocacy and support to victims of domestic violence, youth tutoring, on-site child care, early childhood education, and work-search assistance. ReWA's success is due, in large part, to a strong mutual referral network and collaborative partnerships with other community-based, multiethnic organizations and mainstream service providers including the schools, public health clinics, and law enforcement.

To facilitate community participation, a Project Advisory Group (PAG) convened to offer advice and guidance to the overall project and each substudy. The PAG comprised representatives from the city's Domestic Violence Coalition, the city's Domestic Violence Council, victim services agencies, legal services, law enforcement, and health and social services agencies. The PAG advised the project team on recruitment and safety issues in addition to data collection and analysis.

Participants and Recruitment

Thirty-nine Cambodian women were interviewed for the current study. The average age was 44 years with a range from 32 to 66 years. The majority of women had moderate-to-low incomes with 65% reporting an income less than US \$10,000 and 95% reporting less than \$20,000. All participants were recruited through service providers at ReWA. We used purposive sampling to recruit Cambodian women who had previously used victim services in addition to Cambodian women who had no history of using victim services at ReWA. In the current sample, two thirds of the women had used domestic violence services, while one third had not previously used domestic violence services before participating in the current study.

Bilingual staff from ReWA identified potential participants and conducted screening interviews over the phone or in person to determine eligibility. We also recruited participants through flyers and advertisements in ethnic newspapers and at community centers. The screening interview covered whether the participant had experienced domestic violence, her ethnic identification, and whether she had received any domestic violence services from ReWA or other agencies.

Close collaboration with providers who were well acquainted with the safety issues faced by victims and/or survivors ensured that the research maintained participants' safety. To address possible breaches of confidentiality

in small communities where members may know one another, we informed potential participants of the risks during the screening and offered each woman the option to participate in a one-on-one interview if she felt that the focus group could compromise her confidentiality. None of the participants in the Cambodian study requested one-on-one interviews.

Focus Group Design

Focus groups offer an opportunity to explore complex social phenomena that may be difficult for an individual to address in isolation but more easily clarified in a group discussion. We conducted six focus groups, with 6 to 10 participants each. Attention to the safety of participants in addition to using a culturally competent approach were key factors in planning the focus group. We developed the focus group interview guide in collaboration with Cambodian community partners. This included translation of the interview guide from English to Khmer and back-translation of the guide into English again, to test consistent meaning. Crisis counselors were present at all focus groups, and all participants were offered resources and translated outreach materials from local service agencies.

This project utilized a bicultural and bilingual facilitator from ReWA who we trained in focus group facilitation and qualitative interviewing techniques. The groups were conducted in Khmer, the principal language of Cambodia. Our original protocol was to have groups formed only of participants who had not previously received services from the facilitator's agency. However, in the Cambodian case, we were essentially unable to recruit because of participants' reluctance to speak with anyone with whom they were unfamiliar. We altered the protocol to allow facilitation by a Cambodian service provider from ReWA. This protocol change was considered during analysis and will be addressed in the discussion section of this article.

Data Management and Analysis

With the permission of participants, all focus groups were audiotaped, translated into English, and transcribed. We translated all of the documents that participants had to read and sign, and documents that our interviewers used for screening and interviewing. We took great care working with the translators and with our bilingual partners to ensure that all documents were linguistically correct and culturally comprehensible.

Analysis of qualitative data began toward the end of data collection and continued until all transcripts had been reviewed and coded. Main themes and concepts were organized into codes that gave structure to analyzing and

compiling the data. To organize and retrieve coded data, transcripts were entered into NUD*IST, a software package for analyzing text-based data. First, several research team members did the initial write-up, then the findings were shared with the full research team and reviewed by research participants, as a validity check. The reactions and comments of research participants who provided feedback on the analysis were incorporated into the final report. By including victims and/or survivors in the process of reviewing and discussing early findings, we were able to acknowledge their contributions to the project and solicit feedback from them to inform our final analysis.

FINDINGS

Community Awareness and Attitudes Toward Domestic Violence

When asked to describe community awareness and attitudes toward domestic violence many participants reported that, for Cambodians, domestic violence is regarded as a normal issue within the family (i.e., common, but not considered to be okay). Even though participants stressed that the community thinks it is not right to have violence in the family, domestic violence is relatively common. Similar to other studies on Asian Americans, participants' attitudes toward domestic violence were rooted in cultural constructs from their country of origin, Cambodia (Yoshihama, 2001). One focus group participant illustrated this dynamic in the following statement:

In Cambodia, people understand that it is a normal issue for everyone. It is not important. Because when someone in Cambodia has an argument in the family, everyone thinks it is not important, not necessary. Because this issue is so normal throughout the country and that's how it is.

Consistent with research on Asian ethnic groups, women in the current study believed that discussion of domestic violence was supposed to be kept within the family. One participant shared that "[When] our family has a fight. We can't let the outsiders know. We just want to keep it in our family." Problems are thought to be between the husband and the wife. However, women might talk to a close friend for support.

Participants said that Khmer women are told to be patient and endure abuse from their husbands. There is a strong value on keeping the family together, and divorce is thought to be detrimental to the family and the children. In addition, domestic violence is often viewed as the woman's fault, such that divorced women are viewed with disapproval in the community.

The following conversation between focus group participants illustrates this dilemma: (*P* = participant)

- P1: Whereas the good people would say not to fight with one another as husband and wife. Live in harmony with one another when you have children already.
- P2: Yes, that is right.
- P1: Some people only educate the wife but not the husband who is the abuser. When the elderly leaves, the husband abuses the wife again.
- P2: If they are elders, they say "endure."
- P1: Endure according to the karma [karma is fate according to Khmer custom].
- P2: Our Khmer women must endure according to their karma.
- P1: If we endure according to our karma we will certainly die.
- P2: That is right.
- P1: For me, they say if I can endure for 15 years why can I not endure for another 15 years?
- P2: That's the idea they give me.
- P1: If [we] take each other let [us] take each other for life.

Participants discussed the perception that Cambodian society allows men to do as they please while women must follow strict guidelines for their behavior. Some participants felt that community attitudes are based on the belief that the husband is the head of the household and women are "below them." One participant commented on the persistence of gender oppression in Cambodian society as condoning the abuse of women such that

The oppression of Cambodian society is that they think that women can be victimized, whatever, that's okay. The custom is like that. But for us women, I think there's real suffering. But there is not choice, because the Cambodian custom is this way already.

There was also agreement that when problems arise between husband and wife in Cambodia, the problem would be addressed only within the family, and the legal system would not be involved. Community members or the couple's parents would advise the couple, and a woman would be encouraged to stay with her husband.

What Abuse Looks Like

Most participants talked about domestic violence in terms of husbands abusing wives although some also mentioned "oppression" by mothers- and fathers-in-law and other older family members. One woman said that she suffered abuse by her daughter-in-law. However, most of the descriptions of abuse were in the context of marital relationships.

The participants described a great deal of emotional abuse, including put-downs, swearing, and name calling. These women also reported experiencing various forms of physical abuse such as hitting, beating, and threatening with a knife. In addition, many participants said their husbands try to control them and keep them from working, going to school, learning English, and developing skills for independence. Several women said that their husbands do not let them participate in household financial decisions and to have money of their own. The following story from a participant encompasses many of these issues:

Since I have been living in the U.S., my husband's feeling is not the same when he was in Cambodia. [His] work and money took care of that. I stayed home taking care of the kids. But we both have to work here. My husband emotionally and physically mistreats me. First emotionally, he doesn't want me to go to school. I go to work and can't speak English. . . . He doesn't allow me to have friends, and he doesn't teach me how to deposit money in the bank. He doesn't let me know what the income and expenses are. When he wants to send money to his relatives, he never tells me. He never talks with me about anything. When he comes back from work, he would start a fight.

In addition to men's controlling of financial resources, husbands' gambling was a theme in several of the focus groups. Gambling was seen as an issue of financial control and neglect of family responsibilities. In addition, some participants reported that when men lose in gambling, they use violence to get money from them. Another survivor explained

The husband gambles in card games. He does not give the money which is earned from his work. He goes out without returning home. He gives the money to his girlfriend. Forgetting his children and his wife. After having spent all the money, he abuses his wife again.

Several women described their husbands' relationships with other women as a form of abuse. They said that some husbands have girlfriends on whom they spend the family's money. Wives have little say over this type of behavior.

I have a friend who is abused by her husband. She is not allowed to go anywhere. In the dawn, she is ordered to cook foods and bring them on the food tray to him as well. She has to sit down by folding her legs as well [proper way for a woman to sit down on the floor in the Khmer custom]. She has to iron his clothes when he is going places. She's forbidden to finish washing and ironing all clothes. She has to call him in a polite manner. She is forbidden from saying harsh words. After living in the U.S. for 10 years she never knows any park. She is prohibited to go out. One day he has a girlfriend. She would not dare to say

anything even when he has another woman. He brings that girl to sleep in their bedroom. He lets her [his wife] sleep outside. She would not dare to say anything. If she does, he beat her up while she has to sit in a leg-folding manner.

The mixture of men coercing women to obey and humiliating women with their sexual promiscuity were identified as forms of abuse. In addition to severe shame and isolation, threats and harassment of the woman or harassment of her family and those who try to help were common themes that arose.

Some participants also described control and abuse that is acted out through the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship. "Mother-in-law doesn't like the daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law doesn't like mother-in-law, then the problems start... If we do something right, then they would say it is wrong because they don't like us. . . . They hit us and mistreat us emotionally, therefore they cause us to break up with their sons." Some participants also noted that living in the United States, women are often working outside of the home for long hours. The traditional expectation that women will do all of the cooking and housework can be oppressive given all of their other responsibilities. Some women defined this as abuse.

Responding To Abuse

Women said that their abusive relationships left them feeling fearful, in pain, brokenhearted and depressed. Some women were afraid when their husbands said they would hurt or kill them, their family members, or their helpers if they told others about the abuse. A few participants said that Cambodian women face difficult choices because they want to do the right thing for their families and communities. They worried that others in the community would regard calling the police, leaving their husbands, or divorcing with disapproval. This places additional pressure on women who are attempting to cope with family violence.

For the sake of the family and the children, most participants thought that it is best to try to work problems out and avoid divorce if possible. Women said they stay in relationships because not only do they not want others to know about their family problems but also they do not want their children to be without fathers. Fear of their husbands also kept women from leaving. As one woman stated, "For me also, my husband says if I dare putting him in jail when he gets out he kills me. Then, I ask him to get divorced. He says before getting divorced plan to buy a coffin beforehand. He just says like that." Some women, however, clearly stated that if things did not work out with their husbands, they would seek divorce. They felt that this was an appropriate response if other methods were not effective.

Similar to other studies on Cambodian people, many participants stressed that they would not ask for help or let outsiders help and that talking about your problems with others is at odds with Khmer customs, highlighting the public-private division in Khmer social practices. Participants reported that they do not want to risk disapproval from others and do not want outsiders to know about their family's problems. In addition, women reported that such help was not available in Cambodia, and women would rely on other family members to help. This statement illustrates differences between Cambodia and the United States:

In Cambodia, if the husband and wife fight we suffer the pain and only the parents can help resolve to get us back together. We live in America, there are centers to assist us. In Cambodia, there are no such centers to help us.

Calling police, using the court system, and seeking help from community-based agencies were discussed as new options available to these women. Within the context of using services in the United States while maintaining Khmer values, there were two main courses of action that women described to respond to abuse. One consisted of going outside the family to seek help from a friend or professional. The other was to use personal coping skills to get along with her husband or other family members. In most cases, fear of retribution from the abuser, not only against the victim but also against her family and those who help her, was a major consideration.

Survivor Needs

Mainstream domestic violence services in the United States often focus their attention on women's safety: getting survivors away from their abuser. In contrast, women in the current study said that they wanted help resolving family problems with the goal of keeping the family together. They wanted assistance with getting their husbands to treat them better and hoped that a helper could educate their husbands so that they will treat their families better. Some women said that if resolving the problem was not possible, they would need help to divorce their husbands. Women also needed help to keep themselves and their children safe. In the following excerpt, a woman describes her sense of isolation and need importance of protecting her children:

First is safety for my children and myself. Sometimes, he is mad and comes over to look for trouble, beating or shooting us. I don't care much about myself. I mostly care about my children because they are young and innocent. Second,

emotional help. When we are frustrated, we don't know where to turn to for help. I have no parents or relatives, and I would turn to the outsiders for help.

Some women noted that they would need assistance with tasks such as calling the police, filling out paperwork to get a protection order, and navigating the legal system to gain protection.

The Cambodian participants also identified a need to facilitate their own self-help. Women want providers to facilitate their own learning so that they could help themselves in the future. The example below describes how the women envision this type of support:

We wanted to go to court. Then they drove us to court. This is just like a first lesson to learn. Now we know where the courthouse is. First we want to help ourselves. Such as we need them to help us finding a school to learn English. They take us to that school, then next time we can go there by ourselves. For example that we don't know how to drive, they teach us how to drive. Then we will know how to drive, and we will continue to learn more things.

Another area of need was help with learning U.S. laws. Participants said they often feel at a disadvantage because their abusers tend to speak more English and are more knowledgeable about how things work in this country. Some women thought that if they knew and understood the laws regarding domestic violence, the abuse would stop.

Use of Services

Participants in the current study had limited awareness of available community services for victims of domestic violence. A few women in the focus groups were not aware that ReWA provides services to assist victims of domestic violence. Most participants seemed to be aware that the police are a resource, and some knew that it was possible to obtain protection orders. Participants also mentioned family doctors, counselors, and social workers as potential helpers.

Participants reported that they found specialized services, such as those available through ReWA, primarily through referral. Women are referred by neighbors, other service providers (e.g., the Khmer Association), and police. Participants reported that when they found ReWA they were often helped to access other domestic violence services. Nevertheless, there are many barriers to accessing services for Cambodian women. Some of the strongest themes were fear of the abuser, reluctance to discuss family problems with outsiders, lack of knowledge of services, and pressure from others to endure the abuse.

Participants reported that a number of services worked well, especially those provided by ReWA. These women credited ReWA's services with providing them with emotional support, interpretation, language skills, material support, help accessing other services, and assistance with their children. The following comments offer examples of women's experiences with ReWA:

When there are problems arise, we need help to go to court, go to welfare office, to the kids' school, make doctor appointments, and sometimes they take me and my children out just to make me happy then I will be having fun with others, too... They helped me with English, which I cannot speak. In my life, the most difficult is the language barrier.

Most women said that access to providers who speak Khmer and share their culture was "very important in communication." In reference to support groups, some women felt that it was imperative that they be conducted only in Khmer while others thought there could be benefit from mixed participation of other immigrant and refugee groups.

Participants did not criticize specific services that they had received. However, they did mention some problems they experienced when they tried to get help including unavailability of housing, service charges that they were unable to pay, and delays in getting help.

Parents were concerned that children learn violence from observing it in the family and that exposure to domestic violence creates problems for children. In addition, women said that they would like help with children who they feel are not respecting parental authority. They thought that education and counseling would be helpful and that these services must be available in Khmer.

Supporting Cambodian Women

Participants talked about creating opportunities for Cambodian women to come together to learn from each other, for social support and to help each other solve problems. Throughout the discussion, there was a strong theme of women helping other women, educating each other, and learning basic skills together. If women can get together, they will be able to support each other, provide advice, help with each others' children, feel less isolated, and work together to solve problems. Participants prioritized helping women meet basic needs such as housing, food, clothing, transportation, or in some cases to help them find a lawyer. Other thoughts included supporting their children's needs with food, clothes, and school supplies. Participants also wanted

to ensure more protection for women who are being abused. One woman suggested laws that would use jail time to deter men from threatening to kill their wives and prevent them from committing domestic violence again.

While some women called for police intervention, several women said that men should be educated about the laws in the United States and also hear the woman's side of the story so that they would understand about the feelings of those women who have been victims. One participant suggested to

let them [Cambodian women] speak so that the men and older men who talk—who hold stubbornly to strict customs—to let them understand what kind of suffering is in the heart of the victims. I want them to have a workshop or a class or something to help them understand the women's side.

Several participants suggested starting a women's association that would do all of the above; however, they cautioned that men might feel intimidated by women getting together and learning about the real world. Nevertheless, participants felt that it is important for women to have this opportunity because their isolation is seen as contributing to their vulnerability.

Outreach

We asked participants to identify strategies for reaching out to other Cambodian women in their communities who are being abused. Most said that outreach has to happen by word of mouth. Survivors saw themselves as doing the outreach. If they know someone who is having problems, they will tell her where she can go for help. Participants cautioned that they could tell others about help; however, they could not make them accept it. They said that it is sometimes difficult to get women to come for help for all of the reasons discussed previously.

Prevention

Education was thought of as the best way to prevent domestic violence. The community in general should be educated about domestic violence so that women will not be blamed. Education for men would be critical. Participants said that if only women are educated about domestic violence, men will continue to perpetrate violence. Many thought that if men knew the laws in the United States they would stop abusing their wives. The following excerpts capture the participants' desire to mobilize women and educate men in their community:

P1: No let us create an association to help guide them. To lead those men not to commit wicked conducts. Let them be counseled to act lawfully, to live according to the way of the foreign country...

P2: They are used to hit and that is the reason they continue to hit.

P1: No, let them know what the laws say. That is the area we want them to help us with. Like teaching them not to be cruel, not to do that again. Once they know the laws, they will stop doing that. If they do not stop all, at least they stop doing half. Even helping just half our women will feel relieved little bit also.

DISCUSSION

The current study provides insight into the ways Cambodian women living in the United States interpret and respond to domestic violence in their lives. Through focus group interviews, Cambodian women shared their experiences with domestic violence, discussed ways they cope and respond to abuse, and shared ideas for preventing abuse through stronger social support and education. Help-seeking behaviors described by participants were diverse with several women sharing their desire to learn new things and become more independent. In the current study, participants were not asked to discuss their refugee experiences nor their experiences with war and migration following the Pol Pot Regime. Nevertheless, previous research has demonstrated the importance of contextualizing participants' responses within the conditions of social and political upheaval that took place during refugee migration and resettlement (Ong, 2000). Thus, the participants' discussion of domestic violence can also be understood as influenced by a combination of factors including adherence to patriarchal cultural traditions, exposure to trauma during war and migration, adjustment to life in the United States, and systemic barriers faced as resettled refugees.

Community attitudes strongly affected women's decisions, with participants making references of cultural norms in Cambodia, where men are seen as above their wives. Community norms that discourage seeking help outside the family and pressure on the wife to stay with her abusing husband, in addition to fear of the abuser, were all discussed as issues facing survivors of domestic violence. Although women in the current study suggested that they had more rights in the United States, than when they were in Cambodia, they also disclosed their limited knowledge of the U.S. legal system, which would advantage their abuser's ability to control them. Abusers also exerted power over their spouse by controlling finances and legal information relevant to the household.

The disruption of community life through war and migration in addition to isolation from other Cambodians may also contribute to the incidence of domestic violence. As a primarily agricultural society, many Cambodians resided in matrifocal homes, where sister and natal family networks served as natural barriers to marital disputes and deterred interpersonal violence (Ong, 1989). In contrast, Ong (2003) wrote that, Cambodian settlement patterns in the United States “were dictated by the structural conditions of public housing in rundown neighborhoods that were poorly served by public transportation and far from supermarkets, schools, and laundrettes and other normal urban facilities” (p. 123). Thus, in addition to abusers’ efforts to isolate women, their socioeconomic position and reliance on public housing severed some community ties that, in the past, may have prevented domestic violence. In the future, these protective community ties may be further eroded in areas such as Seattle that are currently moving to mixed public housing developments, such that many Cambodian families with low-income households are dispersed across multiple housing projects.

Overall, changes in gender dynamics that shifted during and after migration and settlement have generated strain between traditional patriarchal gender roles and increasing responsibilities among women to provide for their families. The availability of low-wage service work for women also means that women are more likely to secure employment, while unemployment remains high for Cambodian men. This imbalance does less to shift power to women as heads of households but, rather, has manifested in more determination to maintain power by some Cambodian men.

The women in the current project called for more social support and the need to discuss their situations with each other, demonstrating the potential within these communities to foster strong alliances against domestic violence. Because isolation is a tactic used by abusers, compounded with women further isolated by virtue of language ability and immigration, the participants’ need for social support could not be overstated. Some women thought of support in terms of a nonjudgmental provider, often someone who spoke their language and could help a woman think and talk through her situation. Others wanted social support in a community setting in which groups of women could come together for mutual support and to combat loneliness and isolation.

One action step that followed the current focus group study was initiated by advocates at ReWA, who identified a support group project as a program need. The domestic violence social support intervention, “We can help each other,” thus followed as a collaborative effort between Public Health—Seattle and King County (Public Health), the Department of Health Services at the University of Washington (UW). Through the current project, ReWA

provided first-language, educational support groups for refugee and immigrant women and furthered the community ties among the researchers and service providers involved (see Senturia et al., 2005).

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the potential limitations of the current study. First, the majority of the Cambodian women in the current study were already accessing services. Their views on domestic violence may be significantly different from other women in the community who have not interfaced with social services. Furthermore, victims of domestic violence constitute a hard-to-reach population, such that women who are most vulnerable and isolated were less likely to participate in the current study. Second, because the group was familiar with the facilitator, questions related to services may be subject to bias because women are likely to be reluctant to criticize the agency overall and domestic violence services in particular. Finally, the current study drew from a concentrated community in an urban setting on the West Coast of the United States. Cambodian women living in either urban or rural areas that do not have a concentration of Cambodian immigrants and refugees may have different interpretations of domestic violence and face a different set of challenges when seeking help through formal or informal sources. Future studies should attempt to include greater numbers of women, first- and second-generation immigrants, and women of varying socioeconomic status to expand or confirm our findings.

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